

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

SHANIKA JOSEPH,

Plaintiff,

-against-

ALISON BAKER; JOHN WAGNER,

Defendants.

24-CV-3365 (LTS)

ORDER OF DISMISSAL
WITH LEAVE TO REPLEAD

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN, Chief United States District Judge:

Plaintiff Shanika Joseph, a Bronx resident, is appearing *pro se*. She brings this action under the Court’s federal question jurisdiction, alleging that Defendants violated her rights under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). By order dated May 6, 2024, the Court granted Plaintiff’s request to proceed *in forma pauperis* (IFP), that is, without prepayment of fees. For the following reasons, the Court dismisses the complaint, with 30 days’ leave to replead.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The Court must dismiss an IFP complaint, or any portion of the complaint, that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B); *see Livingston v. Adirondack Beverage Co.*, 141 F.3d 434, 437 (2d Cir. 1998). The Court must also dismiss a complaint when the Court lacks subject matter jurisdiction of the claims raised. *See* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3).

While the law mandates dismissal on any of these grounds, the Court is obliged to construe *pro se* pleadings liberally, *Harris v. Mills*, 572 F.3d 66, 72 (2d Cir. 2009), and interpret them to raise the “strongest [claims] that they suggest,” *Triestman v. Fed. Bureau of Prisons*, 470

F.3d 471, 474 (2d Cir. 2006) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted) (emphasis in original). But the “special solicitude” in *pro se* cases, *id.* at 475 (citation omitted), has its limits – to state a claim, *pro se* pleadings still must comply with Rule 8 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which requires a complaint to make a short and plain statement showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.

Rule 8 requires a complaint to include enough facts to state a claim for relief “that is plausible on its face.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). A claim is facially plausible if the plaintiff pleads enough factual detail to allow the Court to draw the inference that the defendant is liable for the alleged misconduct. In reviewing the complaint, the Court must accept all well-pleaded factual allegations as true. *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678-79 (2009). But it does not have to accept as true “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action,” which are essentially just legal conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555. After separating legal conclusions from well-pleaded factual allegations, the Court must determine whether those facts make it plausible – not merely possible – that the pleader is entitled to relief. *Id.*

BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, a veteran who works at the Veterans Administration Hospital in the Bronx, filed this complaint against Alison Baker and Jack Wagner, who apparently also work at the Bronx VA Hospital. Baker is a “su[i]cide coordinator, and Wagner has some affiliation with an entity called “UBA Houston” in Manhattan. (ECF 1 ¶ II.B.) Plaintiff alleges that Defendants went “into [her] veteran’s medical record . . . over 34 times,” and that there were “no notes” about these incidents because Plaintiff is not a “patient” of either Defendant. (*Id.* ¶ III.) According to Plaintiff, “management . . . cover[ed up]” what Baker and Wagner did, and “us[ed Plaintiff’s] PTSD from the military and are gaslighting [her] to get her upset and fire [her].” (*Id.*) Ursula Jones, a “privacy officer,” tried “to intimidate” Plaintiff to make her “accept a negative screening,” to

justify the fact that Baker “went into” Plaintiff’s “chart.” (*Id.*) Plaintiff states that the Bronx VA Hospital is “corrupt and trying to silence” her. (*Id.*) As a result of these events, Plaintiff “had to go to therapy,” and she seeks \$500,000 in damages and to have Defendants fired. (*Id.* ¶ VI.)

DISCUSSION

A. Claim under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act

Plaintiff invokes the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and asserts that Defendants improperly accessed her medical records. The Second Circuit has explained, however, that HIPAA does not authorize an individual to bring a claim based on such allegations:

HIPAA prohibits the disclosure of medical records without a patient's consent. *See* 42 U.S.C. §§ 1320d-1 to 1320d-7. But the statute does not expressly create a private cause of action for individuals to enforce this prohibition. Instead, HIPAA provides for penalties to be imposed by the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. *Id.* § 1320d-5(a)(1). Nor does the statute imply a private cause of action. *See Ziglar v. Abbasi*, 582 U.S. 120, 135 (2017). By delegating enforcement authority to the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the statute clearly reflects that Congress did not intend for HIPAA to create a private remedy.

See Meadows v. United Servs., Inc., 963 F.3d 240, 244 (2d Cir. 2020).

In short, there is no private right of action enabling an individual to bring suit under HIPAA. Plaintiff’s allegation that Defendants violated the HIPAA statute thus does not state a claim upon which relief can be granted under federal law.¹

B. State-law claims

A district court may decline to exercise supplemental jurisdiction over state law claims when it “has dismissed all claims over which it has original jurisdiction.” 28 U.S.C.

¹ Although a federal law protects individuals’ private medical information, there is no ability to sue in federal court for violations. Instead, individuals may be able to take action under state law. The dismissal of Plaintiff’s HIPAA claim is without prejudice to any action that she may pursue in state court.

§ 1367(c)(3). Generally, “when the federal-law claims have dropped out of the lawsuit in its early stages and only state-law claims remain, the federal court should decline the exercise of jurisdiction.” *Carnegie-Mellon Univ. v. Cohill*, 484 U.S. 343, 350 n.7 (1988). Because Plaintiff has an opportunity to replead her claims in an amended complaint, the Court will decide at a later stage whether to exercise supplemental jurisdiction of any state law claims Plaintiff may seek to assert. *See Kolari v. New York-Presbyterian Hosp.*, 455 F.3d 118, 122 (2d Cir. 2006) (“Subsection (c) of § 1367 ‘confirms the discretionary nature of supplemental jurisdiction by enumerating the circumstances in which district courts can refuse its exercise.’” (quoting *City of Chicago v. Int’l Coll. of Surgeons*, 522 U.S. 156, 173 (1997))).

CONCLUSION

Plaintiff’s complaint, filed IFP under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(1), is dismissed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii), with 30 days’ leave to replead.

The Court certifies under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) that any appeal from this order would not be taken in good faith, and therefore IFP status is denied for the purpose of an appeal. *Cf. Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 444-45 (1962) (holding that an appellant demonstrates good faith when she seeks review of a nonfrivolous issue).

The Court directs the Clerk of Court to hold this matter open on the docket until a civil judgment is entered.

SO ORDERED.

Dated: August 19, 2024
New York, New York

/s/ Laura Taylor Swain

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN
Chief United States District Judge

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

(In the space above enter the full name(s) of the plaintiff(s).)

-against-

(In the space above enter the full name(s) of the defendant(s). If you cannot fit the names of all of the defendants in the space provided, please write "see attached" in the space above and attach an additional sheet of paper with the full list of names. The names listed in the above caption must be identical to those contained in Part I. Addresses should not be included here.)

____ Civ. _____ (____)

**AMENDED
COMPLAINT**

Jury Trial: ☐ Yes ☐ No
(check one)

I. Parties in this complaint:

- A. List your name, address and telephone number. If you are presently in custody, include your identification number and the name and address of your current place of confinement. Do the same for any additional plaintiffs named. Attach additional sheets of paper as necessary.

Plaintiff Name _____
Street Address _____
County, City _____
State & Zip Code _____
Telephone Number _____

- B. List all defendants. You should state the full name of the defendant, even if that defendant is a government agency, an organization, a corporation, or an individual. Include the address where each defendant may be served. Make sure that the defendant(s) listed below are identical to those contained in the above caption. Attach additional sheets of paper as necessary.

Defendant No. 1 Name _____
 Street Address _____
 County, City _____
 State & Zip Code _____
 Telephone Number _____

Defendant No. 2 Name _____
 Street Address _____
 County, City _____
 State & Zip Code _____
 Telephone Number _____

Defendant No. 3 Name _____
 Street Address _____
 County, City _____
 State & Zip Code _____
 Telephone Number _____

Defendant No. 4 Name _____
 Street Address _____
 County, City _____
 State & Zip Code _____
 Telephone Number _____

II. **Basis for Jurisdiction:**

Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction. Only two types of cases can be heard in federal court: cases involving a federal question and cases involving diversity of citizenship of the parties. Under 28 U.S.C. § 1331, a case involving the United States Constitution or federal laws or treaties is a federal question case. Under 28 U.S.C. § 1332, a case in which a citizen of one state sues a citizen of another state and the amount in damages is more than \$75,000 is a diversity of citizenship case.

A. What is the basis for federal court jurisdiction? *(check all that apply)*

☐ Federal Questions

☐ Diversity of Citizenship

B. If the basis for jurisdiction is Federal Question, what federal Constitutional, statutory or treaty right is at issue? _____

C. If the basis for jurisdiction is Diversity of Citizenship, what is the state of citizenship of each party?

Plaintiff(s) state(s) of citizenship _____

Defendant(s) state(s) of citizenship _____

III. Statement of Claim:

State as briefly as possible the facts of your case. Describe how each of the defendants named in the caption of this complaint is involved in this action, along with the dates and locations of all relevant events. You may wish to include further details such as the names of other persons involved in the events giving rise to your claims. Do not cite any cases or statutes. If you intend to allege a number of related claims, number and set forth each claim in a separate paragraph. Attach additional sheets of paper as necessary.

A. Where did the events giving rise to your claim(s) occur? _____

B. What date and approximate time did the events giving rise to your claim(s) occur? _____

C. Facts: _____

What
happened
to you?

Who did
what?

Was anyone
else
involved?

Who else
saw what
happened?

IV. Injuries:

If you sustained injuries related to the events alleged above, describe them and state what medical treatment, if any, you required and received. _____
